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ABSTRACT

This newsletter reports research findings from 31 rural New York school districts on teacher recruitment and retention. Of 31 superintendents interviewed in September 1987, 55% reported rising elementary enrollment; 61% had difficulty filling positions; 84% had too few applicants; and 68% reported a scarcity of appropriately certified applicants. Almost half reported particular difficulties in the areas of special education and foreign languages. Important characteristics of teacher candidates included certification (preferably multiple certification), overall quality and experience, and comfortable "fit" with the rural environment. Over half the superintendents said that unavailability of teachers had affected instructional quality in their districts. Of 63 teachers identified by their superintendents as "successful" long-term teachers, over half had chosen their current jobs because they grew up or had family in the area, thought the area was good for raising a family, or liked the general friendliness of small schools. These factors were also important in teacher retention, along with few discipline problems, administrative supportiveness, and faculty collegiality. Strategies for teacher recruitment in rural districts must recognize teachers who will be satisfied and effective in rural schools, and must raise the visibility of rural schools and attack the negative stereotype surrounding them. Suggestions for action at state, regional, and local levels and in colleges of education are noted. (SV)

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EDissues

A SPECIAL RESEARCH REPORT FROM THE NEW YORK STATE SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

Volume 2, Number 1 August 1988

Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Rural School Districts

As education heads toward the 1990s, rural school districts grapple with a set of staffing problems that have grown during the 1980s. Additional state and federal mandates demand more staff with special qualifications, from speech therapists to technology teachers. Teacher entry requirements have tightened while job prospects for women and minorities outside of education were expanding. And just as the baby boomlet appeared in the kindergartens, the aging teacher workforce recruited during the 1950s began to retire. All of these factors, combined with a perennially depressed tax base, have rural school boards worried about their competitive status in the coming battle to recruit and retain high quality teachers.

In September of 1987 the New York State School Boards Association undertook research to explore rural districts' problems in recruiting and retaining teachers. The Association also sought to identify the factors that attract teachers to rural schools and the strategies that rural schools can use to build quality staff.

The Association Study

A two-pronged study was designed: a telephone interview of school superintendents and a mail-in questionnaire for teachers. Districts identified as "rural" were selected from every region of the state except New York City, for a total sample of 38. Of these, five superintendents stated that the rural classification was no longer appropriate for their districts, leaving an effective sample of 33 districts in eleven regions. Interviews were completed with superintendents in 31, for a rate of return of 94 percent.

Each superintendent was asked to distribute the mail-in questionnaire to three teachers who met the following criteria: (1) service in the district for 15 or more years, and (2) the overall qualities that the superintendent considered desirable in district staff. The teacher sample was thus selected by the superintendents themselves and is assumed to represent long-term, successful rural teachers. Out of a possible sample of 99, 63 teachers returned questionnaires for a rate of return of 64 percent.

The average enrollment of the sampled districts was 1124, but ranged from 4200 to 186. The average teaching staff was 86.

The Superintendent Interviews

Most of the superintendents interviewed made a generous time commitment to the project, with some of the conversations lasting as long as an hour. Because of the open-ended nature of these interviews, many of the responses consisted of opinions and recommendations. The information obtained from the interviews will be discussed first. We will then examine the teacher responses, before presenting conclusions.

Trends

Overall, 55 percent of the interviewed superintendents reported rising elementary enrollment in their districts; 61 percent had difficulty filling positions; 84 percent had an insufficient number of applicants; and 68 percent had difficulty finding applicants with appropriate certification.

Areas of reported difficulty in recruitment, quality, and/or certification:	Percent of superintendents:
special education	48
foreign languages	45
library/media	19
science	16
math	16
technology	16

Several superintendents reported that both the quality and quantity of job candidates were down, and that in some cases they had been saved from a serious problem by sheer luck. In one case, for example, out of a total field of two candidates, one proved to be excellent *and* certified.

Six of the 31 superintendents reported a total of seven unfilled positions as of early October. The areas were strikingly diverse: Spanish, media, and technology teachers, librarian, speech therapist, guidance counselor, and psychologist.

Practices

The superintendents cited characteristics they look for in teacher candidates. Most commonly mentioned was certification, preferably *multiple* certification, since rural teachers "wear many hats." Superintendents often mentioned that their locations far from colleges with graduate schools of education often made it impossible for new teachers to complete their coursework for certification.

Superintendents emphasized the importance of overall quality and experience in new staff, on the grounds that rural districts can afford little supervisory staff time to assist weak or inexperienced teachers. Over a third also cited "fit" as a key quality they look for, noting that teachers who are uncomfortable in a rural setting

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tend not to stay. Other qualities mentioned included interest in professional growth, willingness to work on extracurricular activities, "child orientation", and strong academic background.

The interviewed superintendents seemed to fall into two groups in terms of their recruitment techniques. Almost all described themselves as following a traditional recruitment routine based on newspaper advertising and letters to college placement offices. However, about half of the superintendents also described other strategies, including personal contacts with placement officers, participation and use of displays and slides at college recruitment days, statewide or even out-of-state advertising, use of a BOCES recruiting service, use of the State Education Department job network, ads in *Education Week* and professional journals, and word of mouth. Some admitted frankly that they were not above "stealing" a much-needed teacher from another district. One superintendent said that if a promising candidate comes in for an interview, "I drop everything. I take him around town, show him the school his kids would be attending, introduce him to a realtor, buy him an ice cream cone."

It appears, therefore, that while some superintendents are fairly traditional and unimaginative in their recruiting, others are quite aggressive and have developed a set of personal techniques to try to cope with the tightening supply of teachers.

Incentives

The average base salary in the districts surveyed was $17,500 as of September 1987, representing a range from a low of $13,500 for a central New York district to a high of $20,000 for a district on eastern Long Island. Superintendents frequently mentioned being at a competitive disadvantage compared to suburban or urban districts. On the other hand, a few noted that by keeping their base salary marginally higher than surrounding districts, they were able to compete adequately.

Several respondents also noted that the authority to negotiate experience credits or advanced standing on the salary schedule is extremely important. One said that the most credit he could offer was three years, but another said, "I can make whatever arrangement I think is necessary; I've never lost a recruit I wanted because of money."

Other incentives most frequently mentioned were the positive atmosphere of the district and the good reputation of the school. Various superintendents noted incentives that enhance professional status of teachers or increase take-home pay or both: staff development activities, paid summer work or extracurricular work, a career ladder, pay for staff or curriculum development, teacher center membership. Positive board/teacher relations, teacher participation in decision making, and encouraging teacher autonomy were also cited. Asked about his district's incentives for teachers, one superintendent said succinctly, "We try not to get in the way of effective instruction."

Problems

Despite these efforts to identify, hire, and retain good teaching staff, the superintendents recognized, by a rate of four to one, that recruitment of teachers is a problem for rural districts generally. More than half said that the unavailability of teachers had affected the quality of instruction in their districts. A frequent comment, "We train them for other districts," acknowledged that, even when rural districts recruit young teachers with excellent potential, they tend to lose them to districts offering higher salaries or more cosmopolitan surroundings.

The negative aspects of rural teaching most often mentioned were low pay and lack of social life for young people, especially single young people. Also cited were the lack of cultural opportunities or of graduate schools nearby, and the serious shortage of affordable housing for teachers in rural areas. Superintendents on eastern Long Island specifically blamed housing for their difficulties in recruiting teachers, especially minority teachers. With growing numbers of minority students, hiring minority staff was a key goal for these superintendents. Yet though the Long Island salaries were at the high end of the rural sample, these superintendents complained that they can entice very few minority candidates to interview for positions. Those candidates who are attracted soon discover that they cannot afford housing near the districts that want to hire them.

Other disincentives noted by superintendents included: often being expected to teach outside of one's chosen subject area or to handle several preparations, the special challenges of working with rural children, and the limited facilities and budgets in some rural districts.

The Plus Side

A dark view of rural teaching overall is invalid, however, argued many of the superintendents. Rural areas suffer from negative stereotypes and lack of visibility. The quality of life, both in and out of school, is a positive aspect of rural teaching. The respondents mentioned the sense of "belonging" that a small community and district give, the closeness to students, collegiality of staff, and lack of severe discipline problems. The relaxed atmosphere, community sociability, and the availability of outdoor recreation compensate for the lack of other entertainment, and make rural life very appealing for some people.

The key, as one superintendent remarked, is "a fit between the teacher's values system and rural life."

The Superintendents' Recommendations

To conclude the interview, the superintendents were asked to recommend state and/or local actions to improve the teacher recruitment potential of rural districts. There was a consensus that a rethinking of state aid and regulation was needed. Rural districts should receive salary supplements to help counter their competitive disadvantage, or special incentives should be provided to teachers in shortage subject areas. Other suggestions included abolishing tenure and making teacher retirement transferrable across state boundaries.

Further, the state must recognize special rural needs in developing regulations and designing programs. A newly mandated class may tie up a full-time teacher for five students. Such programs also have created for many districts space problems that are even more severe than the staffing problems. The need for flexibility in certification and the importance of making graduate education available to rural teachers were frequently mentioned. "College professors should get off campus," said one superintendent, and another urged the establishment of intensive alternative certification programs. Colleges also could help by encouraging multiple certification, and by training prospective teachers in rural problems. "We don't need people with highly specialized certification," said an Adirondack superintendent, "we need competent people who are good with kids."

Staff development and funding to support it were stressed by several of the superintendents. Finally, many noted that inequities in the overall tax system put rural districts at a disadvantage. They cited problems with property assessment and tax exemption, and spoke of the need for assessment equalization within districts.

The superintendents' recommendations on how the local community could help to recruit good teachers were general, and touched on three major themes:

- community members should become involved with the schools;
- the community should show a positive attitude toward the schools and teachers; and
- the community should support the schools financially by approving adequate budgets.

The Teacher Survey

Among the 63 respondents to the teacher questionnaire, the average period of service in rural teaching was 20.7 years. Males were

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somewhat overrepresented, making up 44 percent of the sample, whereas statewide, males are only 35 percent of the teacher population. Approximately half taught elementary grades and half, secondary. The most common areas of certification were K-6 common branch (44 percent) and social studies (24 percent). The respondents had been required to teach outside of their areas of certification during only one year of their careers on average, but had worked in nonrequired extracurricular activities an average of 10 years of their careers.

Attraction and Retention Factors

The teacher respondents were asked to indicate which of 15 factors had been important in *attracting them* to rural teaching, and which had kept them in rural teaching. They were also permitted to add factors not provided on the list. "Main reasons" and "other reasons" were identified separately. In compiling the responses, each response was given a weighted score, with main reasons receiving three times the weight of other reasons. The resulting rankings of factors, in descending order of importance, follow:

What attracted you to your current job?	Weighted Score
1. had family in the area	78
2. area seemed a good one for raising a family	66
3. grew up in the area	57
4. general friendliness of small schools	51
5. area attracted me personally	44
6. (tied) job fit well with spouse's job;	33
administration's supportiveness	33
7. relatively few discipline problems	32
8. (tied) salary;	26
opportunity for varied teaching experiences	26
9. collegiality of faculty	25
10. commitment to rural students	20
11. other incentives (besides salary) offered by the district	18
12. (tied) opportunity for varied extracurricular experiences;	12
opportunity for professional growth	12

Why have you remained in your current job?	Weighted Score
1. area seems a good one for raising a family	68
2. have family in the area	64
3. area attracts me personally	60
4. general friendliness of small schools	59
5. (tied) relatively few discipline problems;	46
administration's supportiveness	46
6. job fits well with spouse's job	45
7. collegiality of faculty	43
8. grew up in the area	38
9. salary	30
10. opportunity for varied teaching experiences	29
11. commitment to rural students	27
12. opportunity for varied extracurricular experiences	17
13. other incentives (besides salary) offered by the district	14
14. opportunity for professional growth	12

Caveats

One must note how the questions were worded in drawing implications from the above data. The teachers were asked to identify their reasons for being attracted to and for staying in their current jobs. The fact that "opportunity for professional growth" received a very low ranking could mean that such opportunities were available, but not highly valued. However, it also could mean that such opportunities were not available. All that can be concluded is that in the situation that caused these teachers to remain in rural teaching, opportunity for professional growth was not an important factor in the decision, for the majority.

Remember also that these data represent the opinions, not of all rural teachers, nor of ideal rural teachers, but of a group identified by superintendents as long-term, successful rural teachers. Therefore, school leaders might shape their recruitment process to attract more of these kinds of staff, but might also consider what conditions would attract a different type of teacher.

Interpretation

The motivational profile that emerges from the responses shows that family and personal factors are clearly stronger than professional ones. Fully 50 percent indicated that they either had family in the area or had grown up in the area, and another 22 percent said that a good environment for raising a family was their primary concern.

An attraction to the area and a liking for the friendliness of small schools were other factors high on the list for these teachers. This reinforces the superintendents' comments about the often-ignored positive qualities of rural teaching.

When it came to work-related factors, administrative supportiveness and relative lack of discipline problems outranked opportunities for professional development or varied teaching experiences. Note also that lack of discipline problems and collegiality of faculty move up on the scale of values when we move from attraction factors to retention factors. This may indicate a progression: the beginning teacher is attracted to an area by personal factors such as family and familiarity, but once established, perceives certain qualities of the job as increasingly important as reasons for staying.

Many of the respondents' comments suggested that, while personal factors may have brought them into rural teaching and kept them there, the teachers find a lack of certain incentives in their jobs. Several said they could not afford to do what they are doing without a second income. They noted that new, young teachers commute long distances because of lack of housing and social life, and thus are less involved in the school community. Some expressed the opinion that their districts were failing to recruit quality teachers because of their pay scales, and deplored community resentment of teachers which, coupled with dependence on property tax, keeps salaries low. Although most praised the cooperation and collegiality in their schools, a few spoke bitterly of the lack of compensation and appreciation, of small town politics, and of the lack of privacy. One teacher commented, "I love this atmosphere, but sometimes get frustrated with rural attitudes about education. I truly would not leave this area for money, but would like my image as a teacher to be more appreciated."

Strategies for School District Leaders

The opinions of rural superintendents and experienced teachers about school district conditions and problems suggest certain strategies for the recruitment of teachers. One key is to recognize the kind of teacher who will be both satisfied and effective in the rural setting. The other is to raise the visibility of rural schools, and attack the negative stereotype surrounding them. Steps to do this include the following:

1. Target the kind of teacher you want: a person who loves and is comfortable in the rural setting, who wants to get involved in local life, and who will value the closeness to students and staff in a small district.
2. Recognize that rural districts may have a special appeal for married teachers with children. Sell the district on the basis of the quality of life, safety, and opportunity for family activities that the area offers.
3. Use satisfied faculty members and involved community members to help with the recruiting process. They can be your best salespeople.

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4. Realize that 50 percent of the district's future teachers are probably students in your schools right now. Identify potential teachers, encourage their aspirations, and make sure that local teachers are treated in such a way that their students come to view teaching in a positive light.
5. Be aware that the following may be problems, and get community help in attacking them:
   - employment opportunities for the spouse;
   - relocation expenses;
   - housing;
   - need for summer income.
6. Neglecting the new recruit can lead to isolation and a premature departure from the district. Regular visits from the supervisor, assignment of a mentor or buddy teacher, and special attention to the new teacher's development needs can make the first year a positive experience that begins a long and successful career in the district.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The results of the Association's rural teacher recruitment study leave little doubt that there is a problem of quantity and quality in the supply of teacher candidates in rural areas. The problem thus far appears to be limited to certain subject areas and specializations, but indications are that competition for teachers will grow, and that the effects of the reform movement will increase the supply problem. The comments of the superintendents and teachers who participated in the survey suggest many appropriate solutions, requiring awareness and action at several levels:

At the state level: The impact of state mandates and state aid should be reexamined in terms of the problem of rural teacher recruitment. The low tax base, limited housing, isolation, and diseconomies of scale that most rural districts share have a serious negative effect on their ability to recruit quality teachers, and reform mandates can add to that effect. Sparsity aid could help to alleviate the problem. The state should also review its certification requirements to assess their impact on rural districts. For example, the abolition of all incidental teaching would have a disproportionate impact on rural schools. What is a problem now could soon become a crisis in the education of rural children.

At the regional level: Boards of cooperative educational services are already a mainstay for rural school districts in New York. Some provide cooperative recruiting services for their member districts, and more are developing such services. Other solutions such as itinerant teachers and televised instruction have been provided by BOCES for some time. Further exploration of innovative arrangements for providing excellent instruction to rural children should be funded and explored.

At colleges of education: Graduate programs must be made available to rural teachers so that they can complete their requirements for certification. The problems of scheduling and location of graduate education courses must be addressed. Furthermore, teacher training programs should consider rural as well as urban problems in preparing their students for the realities of teaching, and should encourage multiple certification.

At the local level: The closeness and sense of belonging that a rural community engenders can be a positive factor in recruiting and retaining quality teachers, but only if the community is involved in and supportive of its schools. Local parents and leaders must recognize that they have a part to play in building a strong faculty.

Rural school boards can be the key to marshalling support for quality staff, using political influence at the state level, establishing cooperative relationships regionally, and exercising local leadership. Boards should make a policy commitment to hire excellent teachers, and publicize that commitment. They can show initiative in "selling" the district to good teacher candidates, and in promoting the importance of good teaching to the voters. This kind of proactive leadership can assure that rural students will not lose out in the competition for an excellent education.

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